

India: bravery awards update

As noted in our last edition, an outrageous cigarette promotion by Philip Morris in India links its Red & White cigarette brand with bravery and other forms of selfless service to humanity through an annual bravery award. Operating at state level, the scheme maximises regional press coverage, with flurries of positive associations when the winners' details are announced. In all the pomp and glitter of the judging and awards processes, it seems that no-one sits back to consider whether some awards might not just have a touch of irony that could come back to haunt the sponsors. In January, for example, did it not occur to anyone at PM's publicity machine that a link with dead bodies might not be quite the association the company was trying to cultivate? For in the state of Maharashtra, of which Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay) is the capital, one of the winners was Mr Chandrakant Mehar, 45, whose gold medal in the "Acts of Social Courage" category was for getting dead bodies donated to medical research.

Apparently Mr Mehar, a milk seller by trade, believes so passionately that medical schools should have all the dead bodies they need for teaching and research that he has spent all his spare time over the past 17 years convincing people to donate their bodies to the medical college of Nagpur, in his home state. By the time his citation had been submitted to the 10th Red & White Bravery Awards judges, the bodies of around 200 people had already been passed to the college as a result of his efforts, and he had persuaded another thousand or so who are still alive to pledge that theirs will follow in due course.

Perhaps it is all part of a highly practical view of man's life cycle, originally developed several millennia ago in some little known corner of India's long tradition of philosophy, and imbued with a particularly stoical acceptance of life's many sufferings. In India, these include a massive amount of cancer and other diseases caused by tobacco, resulting in at least 600 000 premature deaths each year, possibly as many as a million. The theory might go like this: cigarettes kill about half their lifetime users before their time, thereby increasing the potential availability of dead bodies for research. This in turn helps train more doctors and scientists, who produce new advances in the prevention and cure of disease,



Despite Myanmar still being a comparatively closed society, British American Tobacco seems to have had no trouble moving in and putting up this giant billboard in the capital, Rangoon.

thus causing more people to live longer. This means that more cigarettes are sold, which kill about half their lifetime users . . . A fantasy? Of course, but so is the association of cigarettes with bravery and social service. One inescapable reality, however, is that this particular prize has inadvertently, if appropriately and inextricably, associated Philip Morris and its Red & White cigarettes with the fate of so many of its users.

The company they keep

The public relations company Hill & Knowlton, which has offices in most corners of the globe, seems to like controversial clients. In the USA, for example, it serves the Teamsters Union, the Church of Scientology, and Mr Ken Lay of Enron, the energy company whose record breaking bankruptcy was accompanied by allegations of dishonest business practices on a truly heroic scale. So it must be heartening for them that in South Africa, they look after the Tobacco Institute. All over the world: nice people to do business with.

USA: getting to organised labour

Although significant gains have been made in reducing overall smoking in the USA, 36% of craft workers and labourers and 32% of service workers continue to smoke, while the rate is down to 21% among white collar

workers. As labour unions often represent blue collar workers, the Organized Labor and Tobacco Control Network (OLTCN) has been formed to reduce class based health disparities in the USA due to high levels of tobacco use and exposure to second hand smoke among working people and their families.

OLTCN, a joint programme between the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and the University of Massachusetts Lowell, engages in a number of activities: from research on how unions can tailor smoking cessation programmes for their members, to consultation on how to create partnerships between the labour and tobacco control movements. In addition, OLTCN actively engages in educational and networking efforts to bring the two movements together. Initial funding has been provided by the American Legacy Foundation.

Specific activities of OLTCN include a pilot project with the eastern Massachusetts branch of the Ironworkers Union (AFL-CIO) that aims to develop and incorporate a smoking cessation programme for young workers in the union's apprenticeship programme. OLTCN is also preparing to conduct a series of interviews in the USA with key union and tobacco control leaders. OLTCN plans to publish the results of these interviews, as well as more in-depth case studies of specific union-tobacco control interaction, within the next year.

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